

So, You're Getting Old!

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by

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The first verse of the twenty-third chapter of the Book of Joshua says, "Joshua waxed old".

Well now, that is nothing unusual, we all do. Everybody here is waxing old. It is as inevitable as the proverbial death and taxes.

Have you not seen along the highway a stone with the words written on it by some religious group, "Where will you spend eternity?" Well, that is important, but before we reach eternity, I suspect we reach old age and now people who really believe Christians should act in the spirit of the Good Samaritan are saying, "Where will you spend old age?"

Now if anyone thinks that that is a minor problem he would better get his head, ostrich like, out of the sand. In the history of the world the aged and the aging constitute a basic social problem. Due to better sanitary conditions, higher standards of living, improved medical practice and other reasons, the number of the aged is growing apace.

Remember the old story about the length of life. It was said in that old legend that when animals were first created, all alike were given a standard span of forty years. The fact distressed the horse which said to the others, "Obviously man is a superior animal to the rest of us, he is entitled to live longer so I am going to offer him ten years of my life". Whereupon the dog agreed, "I think that is a sound idea, you can count on me for ten years too".

The monkey spoke up, "That is okay with me boys, I'll chip in on that proposition". So the horse, the dog and the monkey each gave man ten years from his life and the human being was duly grateful, for his life's span had thus been increased from forty to seventy years. Ever since that, from forty to fifty man works like a horse — from fifty to sixty he leads a dog's life and from sixty to seventy he just monkeys around. The story does not say what he does after that and the "after that" is becoming very important. The number of elderly people is growing apace.

Look at history for a moment. In Caesar's day life expectancy was only twenty-three years. By the turn of the century 1900 it had reached forty-eight. A year or two ago it had climbed to sixty-five for men and sixty-eight for women. The young woman who said she was all worn out using these modern labour saving devices wasn't as worn out as she thought. She had the chance of living three years longer, on an average, than a man. Now I pick up a copy of the "Senior Scholastic" and it says that men in the United States today live on an average of sixty-six years and women seventy-one. For some years there has been almost no change in the average span of men's lives, perhaps because of the speed-schedule of the modern executive.

The report of the Royal Commission on population in Britain estimates that the number of people sixty-five and over will increase there by sixty percent in the next thirty years. Research authorities estimate, that in the next seventeen years, the number of people over sixty-five years of age in Canada will increase from the present near million to a million and a half.

The study of the aged is becoming an actual science. It is called "gerontology". In 1939 the

British Society for research on the problem of aging was organized. In 1950 in Belgium there met the first international gerontological conference with twelve countries represented. In 1951 the second international gerontological conference was held in St. Louis and medical and social scientists met from forty-five countries of the earth to study the process of aging and no less than four hundred papers were presented on this complex theme.

We are awakening to the need of the old people who are increasing by leaps and bounds. It is estimated that one fifth of all United Church members are over sixty.

Now what do old people need and what do they deserve if they have made any serious contribution to life?

1. In the first place they need and deserve suitable comfortable quarters in which to live.

Surely that kind of security is absolutely essential. The simple truth is that multitudes of them are not getting it. Do you know where some people are spending old age? Some are housed in unattractive attic rooms because nothing better is available for them with their limited means. Some of them are living in dingy back basement suites with a view on the lane. Some are spending their old age with relatives feeling that they are in the way no matter how kindly their relatives may be. Not only the very poor but many of moderate means are finding it extremely difficult to locate suitably. In former years the vast majority lived on farms and were an integral part of the household, accepted by the children in the big homes, where large families were the rule. They were looked upon as experienced advisers, of vital help to family life. Today the overwhelming majority have drifted to big cities

where their children, if they live in the city have very small homes with very little room. Sometimes both parents work. An entirely different situation has been created. A great many have been left without families. If society can spend billions on defense, it can and should find means whereby old folk can live in reasonably comfortable housing and surroundings.

Does some hardshell say, "If they had saved their money they would not be in their present plight". My friend, some of them have had sick children in the home. Some of them have had long periods of ill health in their families. There are reasons why many of them have not the funds to pay the extremely high cost of comfortable rental in our time.

When Mr. Winston Churchill, now Sir Winston Churchill was challenged in his campaign for pensions for the people of Britain he said there was one basic reason for action in this regard: the poor were not receiving sufficient revenue to save enough to support them adequately in old age.

Does somebody say, "Oh, well, I have provided for myself". "I am going to stay with my folks when I grow old". How do you know your folk will be living? "I have provided sufficient through insurance", says another. Are you sure that all your investments will still be solvent businesses when you are old? Remember this world operates on the basis — "not my will but Thine". We never know do we!

2. The second thing old people need is nourishing food. It should be especially appealing as their appetites are often less brisk than in earlier, more active days.

3. Again they need a comfortable atmosphere and reasonable warmth where they live. Sometimes the blood stream is getting a little sluggish and they need more heat than they would normally require in younger years.

4. A fourth vital thing is companionship, something to take from them the stark agony of loneliness. Loneliness is one of the most difficult things to handle in the whole world. We have a craving for companionship. Many have lost their life's partner and as the years have gone by have watched one after another cross the river until the stream of friendship has grown narrower and narrower. The older you get, the more you say "good-bye" to people crossing to the other side. I think as long as I live I will remember the words of the man in my office who said, "You know, I am far along in age and where I live nobody ever talks to me. It would be wonderful to have a place to live where I could talk with people." My friends that ought not to be in a Christian society.

5. A fifth great need of many of our aging folk is Christian fellowship — the company of kindred minds.

The church has pioneered in the field of education. It has backed the first great Universities. It has pushed through the Middle Ages for education. Many of the greatest Universities on this continent were founded by the church. The first Sunday School began by feeding hot potatoes to hungry boys. The Church has pioneered in almost every field of philanthropy and has peopled the western world, as Leckie, the historian says, with countless institutions of mercy utterly unknown in other lands until Christianity brought them. We should be extremely active in doing something about this problem of the aged.

Let us think for a minute what is being done by the Christian Church. I recall one day just a few

years ago when a little group came into my office and said, "We ought to be doing something about the aged". So they organized and some of us broadcast and by 1950 we had ten thousand dollars. Now go for a walk through Fair Haven with me as I did with the directors last summer.

Fair Haven is the right name. It is taken from the twenty-seventh chapter of the Book of Acts and the eighth verse. After fasting a heavy wind aboard ship Paul says, "We came unto a place which is called the Fair Haven".

The modern Fair Haven is fair. Look at those two central buildings, modern, up-to-date, attractive with their great windows, opening toward the Fraser river in the distance — a beautiful vista. Below a long sward of grass with plots of flowers and shrubs. To the right extends rows of cottages — twelve duplexes, facing toward the Fraser with their neatly kept lawns. As I arrived an elderly man was painting stones and another was working quietly among the flowers. A croquet set was out on the lawn for the old folk to enjoy.

Although some of the cottages faced the rear of others in the rows, the back of each was as attractive as the front. An interesting lattice work was run around the garbage cans and the oil drums to hide them so they would not spoil the view. There were twelve duplexes in all, each costing seven thousand, five hundred dollars to build. These were for the use of elderly couples and were rented at twenty-five dollars a month. Within each was a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen and a utility room. The elderly couples could cook their own meals if they wished. If they cared to take one or more meals out they could go to the central dining room and join the single people who lived in the main building and took their meals regularly in the attractive dining

room, with the little tables for four — not long ones which would have given the place an institutional atmosphere. If they wished they could bring a friend in from outside to join them.

As we entered the main door of the central building we noted a grandfather's clock which someone had given, a book-shelf well stocked with books, a hall table, plants and rugs. In the rooms where the single people lived were radios, magazines, various items of furniture which had been donated or some they had been allowed to bring in themselves. Notice the piano here in this spot, the radio there. In the culinary department were shelves loaded with pickles and jams and jellies which had been sent in by Women's Associations of Churches which had held showers for the home. There were three telephones and an inter-communication system so that the staff could speak to anyone within the building. Interesting gongs called happy folk to meals. There are thirteen men and twenty-seven women in the main building. I do not know how many in the annex, and a staff of six. The twelve duplex cottages house an additional forty-eight people — twenty-four couples. The total plant is now valued at two hundred thousand dollars after all depreciation is deducted. The project moved faster than that little coterie of people who met in our Church in Vancouver dreamed just four or five years ago.

Does this institution answer the basic need of older folk: comfortable quarters, tasty food, warmth, companionship which takes away loneliness in one's sunset years and Christian fellowship?

I believe it does. One could hardly see the smiling faces on the guests as we went around and not believe that.

No question the surroundings are comfortable, there is tasty food, warmth, companionship and

Christian fellowship. Rising in the morning the residents can go to their own little table for breakfast with a few of their friends. The women can sit around in the big lounge and chat together and knit or sew or pass the time of the day listening to the radio, or whatever they wish. Others can read. You will see the men out on the lawn at croquet or together playing chequers. In the afternoon all who wish can join the Women's Auxiliary of Fair Haven in quilting and doing hand work. The men who feel like it can do wood work and interest themselves in the hobby shop. Incidentally the old people there held a bazaar, selling some of the things both the men and the women had made and raised a thousand dollars with which they bought chairs for the chapel, and other equipment. Once a week people come in to present an entertainment from various Churches or organisations. A service is held regularly in the Chapel in the main building on Sundays.

As we moved through Fair Haven we were introduced to a number of people in the rooms. I remember one fine, elderly woman with a beautiful smile said, "Come on in, I would like you to see my room". As we looked around the comfortable room with the attractive drapes I couldn't help noticing the wash basin against the wall and what was above it -- a picture obviously of her husband who had died sometime before and beside it a little plaque on which were the words, "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength". At once I knew the source of her radiance. Glancing through the window across the grass, I noticed a flag near one of the cottages at half mast. I said, "I see the flag is at half mast. Did someone high in the government circles pass away?" "No", she said, "One of our guests here has passed away. We had the funeral yesterday." She said, "Before he and his wife came to that lovely cottage down there, they were living

in a dingy room reached only after a long climb up a flight of stairs and a walk along a long corridor to a spot which looked out on an unkempt lane. My, they were happy here." I thought the Galilean's eyes must be glistening.

Now move to the city of Calgary! Again a little extent of God's people have become interested in the plight of our elderly folk. Visit the buildings of the old hospital here and see what is coming to pass because some people cared.

Mr. Bert Robb, the indefatigable chairman of the committee who is so vivaciously and enthusiastically interested in this, will get a special halo in the Beyond. In his modest way he told me not to mention his name in this connection because the home was the project of the Church and not one man, but write him down now as one who loved his fellowmen.

Together we entered the front door of the new Calgary home. At the right is the apartment of Mrs. Ross, the matron, who is not only charming, but has an intelligent understanding of the score of these things. To the left is the dining room which has the little individual tables for four. This is not to be any institution — this is a home. Stairways wind to the upstairs floor, corridors extend to the various rooms — some single and some double.

There are three solid, substantial buildings. They certainly know how to build in days of old. While architects might change the arrangements to some extent in our day I doubt if they would ever build a more solid structure that would answer one need for older people — warmth without drafts.

Our official United Church headquarters through the General Council have studied this problem of the aged and laid down certain rules. Our leaders do not feel that it is the duty of the Church to look after all the aged, but to give leadership, demon-

stating how this thing can be done happily and wisely. They have laid down specific rules about high quality and variety of food and accommodation. These rules are to apply to our homes in Vancouver, Saskatoon, Calgary and the new one planned for in Ontario.

In Calgary we have not yet advanced to the stage of cottages for married couples as in Burnaby, but it is hoped that this is but the beginning of some expansion that way later.

As Mr. Robb and I walked around the halls of the new Calgary Home, I forgot for a moment some of the excitement being made for my benefit and suddenly the place became alive. I thought I saw older folk moving into a central room, some of them to play chequers, some to play cribbage. I thought I saw some elderly women in the corner sewing and chatting together and outside when the snow drifts had gone, maybe there could be some games on the lawn and in the winter hobbies for the men who cared, and of course, books and the groups chatting in companionship together. Suddenly there came back those poignant words of the man in Calgary to me. He had passed the ninety mark, but was remarkably agile and strong. He said, "My if I could stay in a place like that, I would have somebody to talk to"

My friend, the science which fosters research to save human life cannot escape responsibility for the life thus extended. For science should not only add to the years of life, but add life to the years. Science cannot do it alone. It takes people who really believe Jesus meant what He said after His story of the Good Samaritan, "Go and do thou likewise"

If there is someone out there listening over the radio or here this morning who wants to help because

he knows this is God's work, then here is the way the Committee suggests help can be made:

1. Donating Money.

2. Helping with one's hands.

People are going over and helping to fix up the drapes, look after the floors and a dozen and one things that can be done by individuals and organizations who wish to help. I was glad to hear that our Young Adults' Club, or was it our Young Couples' Club and some of the AOTS men were busying themselves there.

3. Giving furniture.

It is a thrill to me to have people call the names and say, "I have a radio I would like to place there", or a piano, or "I have some attractive furniture for a room".

4. Interesting another in doing this, or making a bequest.

It may be that someone listening would like to make a bequest for this home. Before passing this matter by, remember that the census of 1951 revealed there were more than 12,000 people in Calgary over sixty-five years of age. The number is growing every year and although many are in comfortable homes, the majority are in great need. This is a challenge to Christian people.

How to flag the changes on this matter — what do we need when we are growing old — comfortable quarters, warmth, appetizing food, companionship which takes away loneliness, and more than that — how we need Christian fellowship — kindred minds — people to see that Grace is sold at the table and the Christian influence is thrown around people there.

Beyond that my friends, what do you really want when the sun is setting in your western sky? Do you not want to have an acquaintance with nature

and flowers, a garden and beauty? Do you not want to know that people still care about you and that you can still join with others in useful hobbies and helpful activities in Christian fellowship? Above all — do you not want to know that the God who made you still cares.

Now do you know that God cares? Sometimes we know because we see a human being that cares and we say that quality of care can't come out of nothing. So a certain Dr. Walker gave his life's energies for years among the lepers in a little island off a rocky coast, giving up his opportunities to mix with men that he might live with them out there. One day somebody said, "Why do you believe in God?" The simple answer came back, "I believe in God because of Dr. Walker". Let us have the old folk believe in God because we care.

To all elderly people who are listening in and all middle aged and younger people a closing word:— put your confidence in God and may He sustain you.

An older man and a younger one were working on a roof. Ladders with sharp spikes on their under sides were thrown down on the roof, and the boy was told to step out on one of them. He hesitated. "Let your weight down on it, my lad", the old man said, "See how it holds. The heavier the load it carries, the more secure it is."

Put your confidence in God.

Remember the verse we often quote from the Book of books, "I was an hungered and ye gave me meat, I was thirsty and ye gave me drink, I was naked and ye clothed me — a stranger and ye took me in, I was sick and ye visited me, I was in prison and ye came unto me. Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of one of these, ye did it unto me". I looked through that. It doesn't say, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto the elderly people . . .", but do you not think Christ would be interested?

